

# A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



## George W. Orff 1835-1908

When Benjamin S. Deane (1790-1867) died in December of 1867, Bangor was left without a resident architect. The individual who filled Deane's place was George W. Orff, whose Italianate, Mansard and Stick Style commercial blocks and residences highlighted the local architectural scene of the 1870s. Orff articulated these styles with the high level of sophistication which had characterized Bangor architecture since the 1830s.

Born in Bangor in 1835, Orff was one of nine children of Edward and Sarah Yates Orff. George Orff apparently entered the carpentry trade during his teens. At the age of twenty-two in 1857, he was admitted to the Bangor Mechanic Association as a joiner. The same year he became a founding member of the Bangor Philomathean Society, a young men's debating group.<sup>1</sup>

George W. Orff's career as a workman was relatively brief. In 1861 he left Bangor to learn the architectural profession in Boston. In whose office he received his initial training remains unknown. However, between 1867 and 1869, the Boston Directory listed him as a draughtsman at 41 Tremont Street, an address shared by Calvin Ryder (1810-1890).

An Orrington native, Ryder was active as an architect and builder in the Penobscot Valley region during the 1830s and 40s. Although he was practicing architecture in Boston by 1853, he continued to receive such major Bangor commissions as the William A. Blake House of 1858 and the Charles Sterns House of 1866. That Orff would have known Ryder and worked under him seems logical in view of their similar Maine backgrounds.<sup>2</sup>

With the knowledge which he had acquired in Boston, George W. Orff returned to Bangor in 1870 to establish an architectural practice. During his eight year career in the city, he planned both commercial and residential structures. One of his first works in Bangor were the Adams-Pickering Blocks of 1871 on



Figure 1. Adams-Pickering Blocks, Bangor, c. 1890 View (Courtesy of James B. Vickery, Bangor).



Figure 2. Eben Webster House, Orono, c. 1875 View (MHPC).

Main Street (Figure 1). These substantial business buildings were constructed of brick with their second and third stories faced in Hallowell granite and their fourth story serving as a slated Mansard roof punctuated by decorative dormers.<sup>3</sup>

The success of Orff's Adams-Pickering Blocks brought him commissions for a series of stylish Bangor commercial buildings. These included the Hatch-Bass-Rines Block of 1872, the Hatch Block of 1875 and the Emerson Block of 1876, all on Main Street, and the Bachelder-Mitchell Block of 1876 on Exchange Street.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to the Adams-Pickering Blocks, these four structures were entirely of brick

with decorative granite window trim and ornamental Italianate rooflines featuring elaborately carved wooden cornices. Orff's reputation for commercial design extended to Waterville, where in 1873 he designed the Peavy Block, a two story version of its Italianate counterparts in Bangor.<sup>5</sup>

George W. Orff was also responsible for planning several important Bangor area homes of the 1870s. Colonel and Mrs. Eben Webster's imposing Orono mansion of 1872 reflected the four square solidity and attention to rich fenestration which is so often found in houses of the previous two decades by Deane and Ryder (Figure 2). The stately Italianate exterior of the Webster House, combined with its ash and walnut interior trim and marble mantels, won its owners congratulations from the *Bangor Whig and Courier* for "their reign in one of the finest private residences in Eastern Maine."<sup>6</sup>

Less traditional in form was the elegant Mansard style home and carriage house which Orff designed for Jones P. Veazie in Bangor (Figure 3). Built between 1874 and 1875, this handsomely sited two story frame dwelling features a bold three story Mansard tower projecting from the center of its facade.<sup>7</sup>

While George W. Orff favored the Italianate and Mansard styles for residences, he also employed the more novel Stick Style for at least two Bangor houses in 1874. For his brother-in-law and himself, Orff planned a frame double house which exhibits stick-like ornament on the porticos and roof gables (Figure 4). Similar stick treatment is found on the gables of the house which the architect designed for Horace W. Durgin. Both of these dwellings represent Orff's skill in handling one of the more exotic forms of Victorian architecture.<sup>8</sup>



Figure 3. Jones P. Veazie House, Bangor, c. 1875 View (Courtesy of James B. Vickery).



Figure 4. George W. Orff—George J. Poole Double House, Bangor, 1986 View (MHPC).

Further indication of George W. Orff's interest in the Stick Style is reflected in the summer cottage which he planned for Henry M. Prentiss of Bangor at Bar Harbor in 1873 (Figure 5). A contemporary account in the *Bangor Whig and Courier* described the cottage as having "a novel finish, full of delightful little nooks and gables, and surrounded by a broad verandah." The newspaper concluded that "it will be exceedingly picturesque as well as convenient in every part."<sup>9</sup> Constructed in 1874, the Prentiss Cottage ranks as one of Bar Harbor's earliest summer houses, but, regrettably, it is now altered beyond recognition.

In 1878 Orff left Bangor for Minneapolis, Minnesota. He began work there in the spring of 1879 and was joined by his brother Fremont D. Orff, who served first as his draftsman and became his partner in 1881.<sup>10</sup> The Orff Brothers primarily seem to have used the Romanesque Revival style. Examples of their work were published in such prestigious journals as the *American Architect and Building News* of Boston and *The Inland Architect and News Record* of Chicago. The May 18, 1889, issue of the *American Architect* illustrates a particularly ambitious commission, a \$75,000 stone castle for J. Frank Collom of Minneapolis. That the Orffs' practice extended beyond Minnesota is indicated by their design of the Hotel Eastman in Hot Springs, Arkansas in 1889.<sup>12</sup> In 1892 the Orff Brothers dissolved their partnership. Fremont continued as an architect, while George became one of Minneapolis' leading building contractors.<sup>13</sup>

George W. Orff returned to Boston in 1905 and died in Skowhegan in 1908 at the age of 73.<sup>14</sup> He is buried in Bangor's Mount Hope Cemetery. The Adams-Pickering Blocks are his most visible archi-

tectural legacy in Bangor as well as in Maine. The buildings remain today as they were described in the *Bangor Whig and Courier* in 1871, "an ornament to the street and a credit to the owner, designer, and builders."<sup>15</sup>

Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr.  
January, 1986

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Bangor Mechanic Association Records, Bangor Public Library. *Constitution and By-Laws of the Bangor Philomathean Society*, Bangor: Samuel S. Smith, 1858.
- <sup>2</sup> See Vol. I, No. 3 of *A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine* for further information on Calvin Ryder.
- <sup>3</sup> *Bangor Whig & Courier*, April 21, 1871; November 22, 1871; January 23, 1872.
- <sup>4</sup> Hatch-Bass-Rines Block: *Bangor Daily Commercial*, October 3, 1872; Hatch Block: *Bangor Whig & Courier*, December 7, 1875; Emerson Block: *Bangor Whig & Courier*, December 5, 1876; Bachelder-Mitchell Block: *Bangor Whig & Courier*, December 5, 1876.
- <sup>5</sup> *Waterville Mail*, September 19, 1873.
- <sup>6</sup> *Bangor Whig & Courier*, February 22, 1872.
- <sup>7</sup> *Bangor Whig & Courier*, January 9, 1875.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> *Bangor Whig & Courier*, January 6, 1874.
- <sup>10</sup> Neill, *History of Hennepin County and the City of Minneapolis*, Minneapolis, 1881, p. 608.
- <sup>11</sup> *American Architect and Building News*: May 18, 1889, Residence of J. Frank Collom, Minneapolis, Minnesota; August 24, 1889, Mission Chapel, Minneapolis, Minnesota; *Inland Architect and News Record*: October, 1889, Tenement Block for Henry W. James, Minneapolis, Minnesota.
- <sup>12</sup> *Industrial Journal*, Bangor, February 7, 1890.
- <sup>13</sup> Information provided by Paul Clifford Larson, Curator of Architecture, University Art Museum, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.
- <sup>14</sup> *Bangor Daily News*, March 13, 1908; March 17, 1908.
- <sup>15</sup> *Bangor Whig & Courier*, November 22, 1871.



Figure 5. Henry M. Prentiss Cottage, Bar Harbor, c. 1875 View (MHPC).

#### LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY GEORGE W. ORFF

Mercantile Library Interior (Kenduskeag Block), Bangor, 1870, Destroyed.  
 Adams-Pickering Blocks, Main Street, Bangor, 1871, Extant.  
 Hatch-Bass-Rines Block, Main Street, Bangor, 1872, Extant.  
 Eben Webster House, Orono, 1872, Destroyed.  
 City Maintenance Building, Court Street, Bangor, 1873, Destroyed.  
 Jacob Peavy & Brothers' Store, Main Street, Waterville, 1873, Destroyed.  
 Town Hall, Orono, 1873-74, Destroyed.  
 European and North American Railroad Station, Bangor, 1874, Destroyed.  
 Horace W. Durgin House, Center Street, Bangor, 1874, Extant.  
 George W. Orff—George J. Poole Double House, Jefferson Street, Bangor, 1874, Extant.  
 Henry M. Prentiss Cottage, Bar Harbor, 1874, Altered.  
 Jones P. Veazie House, Fountain Street, Bangor, 1874-75, Extant.  
 Hatch Block, Main Street, Bangor, 1875, Destroyed.  
 Unitarian Vestry, Main Street, Bangor, 1875, Not Executed.  
 Bachelder-Mitchell Block, Exchange Street, Bangor, 1876, Destroyed.  
 Emerson Block, Main Street, Bangor, 1876, Destroyed.  
 David Lunt House, Ohio Street, Bangor, 1876, Extant.  
 Bangor High School Remodelling, 1878, Destroyed.  
 James W. Robinson House, French Street, Bangor, 1878, Extant.

#### SOURCES

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